DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 424 150 SO 029 174

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TITLE Listening to History: A Qualitative Research Study.
PUB DATE 1997-00-00
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid Western Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, October 15-18, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Art; College Instruction; Higher Education; History Instruction; *Interdisciplinary Approach; Interviews; *Multicultural Education; *Oral History; *Qualitative Research

ABSTRACT

This study used an oral history method to collect data from contemporary citizens who grew up in the United States during the 1930s and 1940s. The primary purpose of the study was to gather historical evidence from those eras and identify participants' life themes and values. A secondary purpose was to implement interdisciplinary collaboration among different departments of the university. The research process included: (1) identifying participants; (2) identifying artists; (3) seeking financial and professional support from different departments; (4) interviewing artists; (5) seeking permission from the participants; (6) arranging time and place for interviews; (7) interviewing participants; (8) transcribing interview tapes; (9) providing data for artists to illustrate participants' life stories; (10) analyzing their life themes; (11) organizing content; and (12) preparing information for presentation. The study intended to demonstrate qualitative research and interdisciplinary efforts to education majors enrolled in multicultural education classes. Issues concerning ethics of using participant's names and art work from the artists are also addressed. (EH)

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Listening to History: A Qualitative Research Study

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Anderson, Indiana

Paper Presented at the annual meeting of Mid Western Educational Research Association, Chicago, Illinois. October 15-18, 1997.

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Listening to History: A Qualitative Research Study

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Abstract

This study utilized an oral history method to collect data from contemporary citizens who grew up in American society during the 1930's and 1940's. The primary purpose of this study was to gather historical evidence from those eras and identify participants' life themes and values The second purpose of this study was to implement interdisciplinary collaboration between different departments of the university. The research process included: identification of participants, identification of artists, seeking financial and professional support from different departments, interviewing artists, seeking permission from the participants, arranging time and place for interviews, interviewing participants, transcription of interview tapes, providing data for artists to illustrate participants' life stories, analyzing their life themes, organizing content, and preparing information for presentation.

This study intended to demonstrate qualitative research and interdisciplinary efforts to education majors who enroll in multicultural education classes.

Issues concerning ethics of using participants' names and art work from the artists will be discussed.

descriptors:

Qualitative Research; Multicultural Education; Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Listening to History: A Qualitative Research Study

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Diversity exists in our society. For education to be effective, school must provide appropriate experiences for students to understand the existing cultures and racial differences in society. A comprehensive education program must be sufficiently humane to underscore how much humans should value one another, and such programs should be freely fluid to allow adaptation to ever changing circumstances (Kierstead & Wagner, 1993).

Oral history or in-depth interview is a qualitative research method. This method seeks and records answers to questions in an effort to understand other person's lives (Yow, 1994). The advantage of applying an oral history approach allows the researcher to bridge the gap between curriculum and community. It brings history home by linking the world of the textbook and the classroom (Dunnaway & Baum, 1996). The main purpose of this study was to demonstrate an oral history qualitative method to students in a multicultural education course. A secondary purpose of this study was to involve the Art and Graphic Design Department in an interdisciplinary education endeavor.

II. Perspectives

One of the important purposes of teacher education is to provide the preparation for individual prospective teachers to develop competencies for perceiving, believing, evaluating, and behaving in different cultural settings (NCATE, 1977). The direct contact and involvement with people who differ culturally or racially may change individual's attitudes positively (Banks, 1988).

Oral history is the oldest form of transmission. It was universal when there was no written language. The advantage of applying an oral history approach is that it allows researchers to practice field work and to use evidence as a source of historical information generated by others (Lummis, 1988).

Oral history is mentioned in many terms in literature. James Bennett, President of the Oral History Association, in 1982 used terms such as life history, self-report, personal narrative, life story, oral biography, memoir, and testament. This approach is an active process in which interviewers seek out, record, and preserve such memories.

The primary purpose of this study was to identify citizens who grew up in the 1930's and 1940's with different cultural backgrounds and from different regions in the U. S. Those citizens have gone through the Great Depression, World War II, the Civil Right Movements, and post war changes. The society they lived and grew up in provoked their thinking and perceiving process. They obtained different life themes and values than those of college students today. Those themes and values are historical evidence. As Judith Stacey (1991) pointed out such evidence involved cultural constructions, constructions of self as well as others. Therefore, this evidence is valuable information for students to appreciate and understand regarding the development of this country.

The second purpose of this study was to gather participants' favorite childhood stories. These stories allow us to understand who they were and why they treasured these stories. As Henige (1982) stated people's beliefs and values are best answered by stories. A third purpose of this study was to involve art and graphic design students in this project as a means of interdisciplinary collaboration. Through this collaboration artists will be exposed to our pluralistic society.

III. Population, Instrument, and Procedures

In the spring semester 1997, initial contacts were made to identify potential participants. Resources and equipment support were sought through the Faculty Development Committee at Anderson University. Art and Graphic Design students were identified through the department and were interviewed by the researcher. Time and places for interviews were arranged before the end of spring semester and during summer 1997. Four participants were identified and contacted for this study. A set of questions for each participant was developed based on that individual's cultural and regional background. A tape recorder was used during the interview process. Transcripts were typed into written formats. The artists used the transcripts

and illustrated participants' life stories and favorite childhood stories. Each participant received a copy of his/her life and childhood story with illustrations.

The participants in this study included: an African American male, who grew up in Mississippi during the Civil Rights movements; a Caucasian male, who as a WWII veteran fought side by side with Chinese soldiers; a Native American male, who grew up during western expansion; and a Catholic female, who married to a Jew. Questions were developed by the researcher after the initial contact with each participant.

The research was conducted in the Spring 1997 and Summer 1997. It took one to two hours for each contact. Every participant has at least two to three contacts.

The research process included:

1. determine objectives
2. identify the pool of interviewees
3. identify artist
4. make initial contact and explain the objectives and process
5. establish questions according to each participant's background
6. record childhood stories based on participant's choice
7. in-depth interview
8. transcribe interview tapes
9. share draft and ask for feedback from participants
10. illustrate childhood and life stories.

IV. Summary of the Findings

As a result of this study, the participants' life stories and favorite childhood stories were bound into a book and used as a demonstration of qualitative research for students who enrolled in multicultural education classes. These were used as part of the curriculum for students to identify participants' life themes, beliefs, and values in the era in which they grew up. this process would also be used for prospective teachers to practice in-depth interview techniques.

This research revealed information regarding life styles, perceptions, values, and beliefs from the south and the mid-west in the 30's and 40's. Common

statement from three of the participants include the concept of "respect for the Whites", and "to treat everyone equally". This undoubtedly resulted from these participants having experienced prejudice in one way or the other.

Their childhood stories are rich in culture. Stories from one white male and one white female revealed the values of honesty and hard work as they were taught and modeled by their parents. A story told by the African American revealed the collaborative effort among community people. Stories shared by the native American expressed the love and respect to nature and animals. Although these participants expressed different virtues from their childhood, these are valuable lessons for their fellow people as well as human kind as a whole.

The participants reported they had simple life styles. Neighbors spent time and did activities together. Children played outside with neighborhood kids more than is the case today.

All participants took this research seriously. They prepared scripts of their childhood stories and made tapes before the interviews. They proof read drafts of their life stories and provided feedback. These efforts helped in completion of the successful project.

The sincere interaction and communication between the researcher and her participants made this project interesting and rewarding. This project also illustrated that the oral history approach is a dynamic research method.

V. Importance of the Study

The study collected contemporary Americans life themes and perceptions of values in the era and regions that they lived. The oral history collected spoken memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews. This method allowed the researcher to identify persons who grew up in society where different historical events shaped their lives. Their perceptions, values, and beliefs may not be recorded in formal history, yet, this work reflects their judgments and experiences. This data can be useful as a tool to identify individual's experiences and uniqueness for students who are taking a course in multicultural education.

The second segment of this study was to collect participants' favorite childhood stories. This data can provide information to identify family values and teachings, and important personal beliefs. All participants expressed family values of "hard work" and "honesty". Humans do share more similarities than differences.

Another important aspect of this study was through consistent and lengthy communication with the Art and Graphic Design Department on campus to foster collaboration. The values of art work, the ethics of using materials, and the duration of the completion of illustrations were discussed and agreement was reached. This was the first collaboration between the Art and Graphic Design and Education Departments. The process raised the awareness of diversity in the Art and Graphic Design Department. It was also a landmark of interdisciplinary collaboration on campus. This project proved to be a dynamic and interactive process for departments and participants alike.

VI. Conclusion

According to Dewey the purpose of education is to release students' wisdom and sympathy. Using oral history or in-depth interview allowed the individual to share many valuable memories with the interviewer. The participants' life stories may force many additional students to redefine their goals and reexamine their future lives. By preserving a written record of personal stories, the project offered the participants hope that their voices might be heard by an audience beyond their immediate circle of family and friends, and that their lives would touch people they had never met.

The names of the participants have been altered to protect them. Permissions was obtained from them and the artist to utilize their stories and art work in an educational setting. This project was done in a respectful and responsible manner. This research was completed smoothly which encourages the researcher and her students to explore and expand similar research in the future.

This project has helped education majors and educators to learn how people develop strength and where they found meaning in their lives. Oral history proved to be an effective tool for students to develop a sense of relativism.

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